

You Are Not Alone : Memories of Paul Veyne.

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1 Definition of a real intellectual

I cannot say that Paul Veyne's work has been important in the development of mine. Many others, to whom he was connected, loosely or closely, but primarily Michel Foucault, who had given him the quirky title of "honorary homosexual", a title he, who was not, wore with much pride up to the very end, played that specific role.

As I have said, other than a summary knowledge of his work on the historical birth of christianity¹, from basic beginnings as a sect to ends as a world religion, his work has not played the same big role for me as others have.

But, here, I want to bear witness, in the same way as Baldwin had done for the important intellectuals of his times, of the things that are not found in books :

No one (had) thought to write them down, even though they might have been important, even though they held them to be very important (even) perhaps, even when they stayed with them for a long time; or they did, but forgot to pass them on, or did, but whatever life has to offer prevented it all happening.

I want to talk about the intellectual as a Man, as a human being of flesh and blood. And, many choices, and many regrets, ...

"The sweat, the blood and the tears" – mentioned by Faulkner, a Southern writer who spoke true.

I never forgot the kindness that Paul Veyne showed me, the simplicity with which he received me at his house, down in the South (the South of France). And, I think that I know that many others can say the same, but will they, have they? I don't know.

I don't want these memories, the memories of these events, to leave me, or leave with me. And, so, I write them down here, with no knowledge of what use they may have. But, important, they were to me.

I was in my mid-twenties when this all occurred, very different from now, in many ways. And, for the first time I got to meet, and understand a real intellectual. What it meant to be an intellectual in the past and 21st century.

I want to pass these memories on to others, so that they will not err.

Of all the many people I had met then, Paul Veyne was the one who received me with the most : warmth, comfort, protection, simplicity – something I can

¹ *When Our World Became Christian: 312 - 394*. (Own note : the Edict of Thessalonica of 380 played an important role. And, Constantine, of course.)

unfortunately not say for all of them, then.

But, he was it : the real deal. A real, real intellectual.

And, I do not mean the ones that we picture when we think of that word, what an abstract concept, or see on television, when we say “intellectual”.

The good professor in *Good Will Hunting* (1997) came close to it, although Will himself represented the figure, the figure to me, of the “real intellectual” (in t-shirt), the one I will tell you about in just a minute. Nash in a *A Beautiful Mind* (2001) – I don’t know. But, the “distinguished guest” in the color segment of *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), by Raoul Peck, definitely is not it. And, I’ve known many, too many of these *real* false tweed-intellectuals.

2 The train station

He came to pick me up at the train station with his small car.

Please, understand, when reading these lines that I am talking here about one of the great intellectuals of the past and this century, a professor at the *College de France*, a professorship at least equal to any at Harvard, Princeton or MIT, and superior – they (do not) know.

And, so, came, in his small, and slow if I remember correctly, car Paul Veyne to pick me up. I didn’t understand, but I did later : this was most likely so, because he was – so – with everyone.

A real, real intellectual.

No heroes in books, or scholarship, but then lame-o’s in real life.

Paul Veyne came from “ordinary backgrounds”, as they like to put, the same that have become so extraordinary now. And, I want to render this encounter in (the same) ordinary terms too. (I will try.)

He wore the black leather vest that you can see in many photos.

A man of just less than average size. But, a great mind.

He was another meteorite fallen from the sky. One of us.

He had some disfigurement, I think, I remember, but I don’t remember where. But, a heart of gold.

We talked in the car, on the way over to his house.

I usually can’t really talk in cars, the last time I did I vomited on my t-shirt. But, somehow, it all worked out, in the end.

I only remember him telling me about a translation that he was working on, and he had been working on for some time already then I believe.

A translation of the Aeneid by Virgil. I did not know the significance of this work then – and I think he was disappointed.

Disappointed, but only, to not be able to talk about such a great work and a great poet. We often feel along, in that way.

“*a deity, greater than I; who, coming, shall rule over me.*” One poet teaches another, meanwhile one intellectual shows another.

We drove through typical Southern landscapes. His house was remote.

3 The house (a huge dog, with no mirrors)

A huge, *huge* dog came to greet me. He was happy to see me. (I don't know what breed it was.) (But, I discovered a new breed of intellectual.)

The house was no villa – it was just a house.

Something that many cannot afford now, but it was it.

This encounter taught me so many things, (that) I must pass them on now.

His wife. A doctor of medicine, I believe.

One upon a time. She must have also been very beautiful in her youth (Raven hair?).

She looked at me anxiously, smiled with a huge, sincere smile that revealed teeth all black, rotten.

“But, if the color of their skin, were to be made that of their hearts, theirs would be charcoal, black.”

I understood many things instantly, but one : she was probably a golden heart too.

But, life, life...

This life that makes it so hard for all of us, to live the lives we wish we could live. (Brecht and *The Good Person of Szechwan*.)

She exclaimed in a burst : “OH, I LIKE THEM!”, speaking about me.

A kindred spirit had met another.

In her folly, she had recognized someone like herself. Someone normal.

A normal reaction to abnormal circumstances : hence normal.

His, this house – in which there were no mirrors – were packed full with books, up to the ceiling. All colors, white, beige rendered-yellow, black, magazines, all sorts.

His desk was a fortress amongst many books.

We then went up to the attic room. And, talked.

His youth, that had been simple, something that cannot be said about our new professors, who will never be like us, not even “if they had a thousand lives”. They simply cannot understand. And, don't.

His friendships, with Michel Foucault, and many others.

I could see why someone like Michel Foucault – despite their superficial differences – would have taken an interest in Paul Veyne and enjoyed his company.

He who had a most joyous nature (gay), and endearing. There was something quirky about him (queer).

All of which went towards earning him the honor of “honorary homosexual”.

He was one of us, in many ways.

He didn't want to stop to talk, and I didn't want to stop to listen. Until, both of our human bodies gave up eventually, late into the night.

4 The bees that bit me

The next morning, I woke with insect bites *all over* my forehead.

Something had happened to me.

I don't know what Southern bees did this to me.

There were no mirrors, but I eventually found one in the guest bathroom.

The next morning we ate breakfast, the dog kept wagging his tail against a piece of furniture in the hall.

"He likes to play jazz", commented Paul Veyne.

He then began to sing a poem in Japanese (haiku?). Some things just cannot be invented.

We then resumed our conversations, this time in the office.

He showed me some of his papers, I don't remember which, perhaps the translations.

Did he ever finish them?

Some things, some projects, accompany us for a long time, but their only purpose it turns out is to give way to other (more important) things.

(I wanted to write one last article entitled "What is computer science?", that I had been working on for years, subtitle "The two crises of computer science", but then came the one on Jean Cavailles, I kept my word, and all of them became an answer to that question. Others would...)

He gave me three catalogs from Sotheby's – one was on the Italian Renaissance Caravaggio (?), I still have them, but don't remember the other ones, I don't have them with me right now.

They sent them to him, and they sent them to him even though he didn't know what to do with them. I think, I remember.

The long journey home

I hope Paul Veyne will forgive me in writing all of this down.

In writing them down, I hope to convey to others the lessons that I learned during this important encounter.

It wasn't what was talked about, that was important, that mattered to me, in the end.

But, the many lessons – learned in many encounters – that I had learned on what it means to be an intellectual : a real intellectual, no sham's.

Possibilities actualized amongst all possible ones – like Cavailles said.

I never wanted to be anything other than myself after this, because of him, because of others.

Who had had the courage to be themselves, before us. We must praise them.

He had showed me how in his own way, they who probably came before him had showed him how, I don't know (how), but we must pass this on.

He drove me back to the train station.

We said goodbye, at the train station.

I have carried these memories with me for so long now. I am free of them, and they have freed me.

The rest is in books, but it is not always, not alone, the most important.

(You are not alone.)

Acknowledgements

To my first partner, the big love of my life : you showed me kindness and gave me happiness to last me a lifetime, and I'm not sure I deserved it. And, I ask forgiveness from you, for all the wrong things I did to you. Thank you...